

Tips for Talking

When should I start talking with my kid about sex and relationships?

Research tells us that kids and teens who have regular conversations with their parents and caregivers about sex and relationships are less likely to take risks with their sexual health, and more likely to be healthy and safe. So it's never too early and it's never too late to start talking with your kid about sex and relationships.

As soon as kids start learning to talk, you can teach them the names of the parts of their body. As soon as they start being around other kids, you can teach them about respecting other people and talking about their feelings. These things lay the groundwork for healthy sexuality and relationships later on.

So how do you keep the conversation age-appropriate? It's all about what details you include. For example, if a 5 year old asks, "What's birth?" you can respond, "When a baby comes out of a mother's body." If a 10 year old asks the same question, your answer could have more detail and might start with, "After 9 months of growing inside the mother's uterus, a baby comes out through her vagina."

Don't worry if your kid is in middle or high school and you haven't started talking with them about this stuff yet. It's never too late, and there are lots of ways to get the conversation going. Just don't try to "catch up" all at once – that can be overwhelming. It's better to have lots of little talks over time. The most important thing is to make it really clear to your kid that they can ask you questions or come to you for support without fear of shame or judgment.

How do I start conversations about sex and relationships with my kids?

Talking with your kid about sex, relationships, and their health is a lifelong conversation. Doing a little bit at a time instead of having "the talk" takes pressure off you, and helps your kid process your values and information over time. Having regular conversations also sends the message that these topics are important enough to keep bringing up, and are a normal part of life.

Everyday life provides lots of opportunities for talking about sexuality and relationships. Here are some common teachable moments to look out for:

- When you, another family member, friend, or neighbor announces they're pregnant
- [When puberty, dating, LGBTQ issues, love, or sex comes up on a TV show, in a movie, or in a song on the radio \(/uploads/filer_public/2a/0a/2a0aacc1-b620-4cfe-90c8-db039ecdd2a2/20171005-letstalk_tv_parentguide-english_d06_1.pdf\)](#)
- When gender stereotypes are pushed in ads, games, TV, books, movies, etc.

- When you see unrealistic portrayals of, or very sexualized, bodies (i.e. photoshopped celebrities or models)
- Ads for pads and tampons, birth control, or condoms
- News stories or ads that talk about sex

When any of these things come up, jump in and start a conversation. Start with an open ended question like:

- “What do you know about how pregnancy happens?”
- “What do you think about the fact that that celebrity is photoshopped on the cover to look different than they do in real life?”
- “How do you feel about this ad for dolls only having pink and girls in it?”
- “What would you do if someone you were dating started acting like that character on this TV show?”

Here are some other ways to kick off a conversation:

- In elementary and middle school, give them books about anatomy or puberty and let them explore them on their own. Check in with them to ask what they learned, what was confusing, and answer any questions they may have.
- Check in with them regularly about what’s going on with them and their peers at school. Ask them how they feel about their friendships, and help guide them through any troubles they’re having.

- Once they're older, ask them about crushes or dating or relationships. Ask them how they think they'll know when they're ready to have sex, including the responsibilities that come with it (like preventing unintended pregnancy and STDs).

Be open and listen to their answers. Fill in gaps of knowledge and correct misinformation when you hear them. If they get embarrassed when you bring any of these topics up, reassure them that it's OK to be embarrassed about this stuff – but they have nothing to be ashamed of. Give them your take on things based on your values. And let them know they can always come to you to talk things through, get advice, find good information, or get access to health care.

How do I answer my kids' questions about sex and relationships?

When your kid comes to you with a question about sex and relationships, take a second and appreciate the good job you've done to get you to this point. If they feel comfortable asking you these questions, it means your kid trusts you and respects you.

Here are some tips for answering those questions:

- Don't jump to conclusions about why they're asking what they're asking. You can say: "Can you tell me what you already know about that?" or "What have you heard about that?"
- Keep your answers short and simple, and explain new words that your kid might not have heard before.
- After giving an answer, keep the conversation open. You can say: "What other questions about stuff like this do you have?" or "What's going on in your life/at school that made you think more about this stuff?"
- Check their understanding. After answering a question, you can ask, "Does that answer your question?" or "What do you think about that?"
- If you don't know the answer to something, you can look it up on your own or together. You can say, "I'm glad you asked that question. I'm not sure how to explain it/what the answer is. Let's look it up!"

Remember, it's OK if you feel a little awkward, or if you or your kid get embarrassed. Try to work through your embarrassment. It'll be worth it for both of you. Plus, the more practice you get answering tough questions, the easier it becomes.

What else can I do to help my kids stay safe and healthy?

The best way to keep your kids safe and healthy is to stay involved in their lives and to set some boundaries.

Here are some good ways to stay involved:

- Ask open-ended questions about their day at school, like “What was the most memorable part of your day?” or “How are you feeling about your new teacher/class/school?”
- Ask about their friends, and get to know them and their parents. Encourage them to spend more time with kids who you think are a good influence.
- Always be aware of which adults are around when your kid is out or at other houses.
- Ask them questions about what they’re up to online.
- Encourage them in their hobbies and interests. Be present at games, recitals, etc., when possible.
- Always be open to their questions.

As kids grow into preteens and teens, and start to become more independent of you, setting some reasonable boundaries will make them less likely to engage in risky behavior such as drinking, smoking, having unprotected sex, or having sex before they’re ready:

It's Time to Talk

- Establish clear expectations (like curfews, dating, rules about drugs/alcohol, etc.) and check in regularly to be sure those expectations are met. You can make this a conversation with your teen, too. By listening to them and allowing them to negotiate, it shows that you respect them and understand that they are becoming more responsible for themselves.
- Encourage them to get involved in activities where an adult will be around – like after school clubs or sports.
- Know where they're going and who they'll be with, and don't allow preteens or teens to spend a lot of time alone without adults present.
- When preteens and teens are invited to each other's houses or to parties, make sure there are going to be adults there. That means being there when your teen hosts to make sure there aren't drugs or alcohol around. If your teen is going somewhere else, you can call the parents of the hosting teen to make sure an adult will be around to supervise.
- Discourage preteens and teens from going out on school nights and dating or hanging out with older teens or young adults.
- Get to know your kid's friends, their parents, and especially the parents of anyone your kid may be dating.

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